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Selecting the most relevant character strengths for Norwegian Army officers: An educational tool

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Abstract

Problem statement: Officers educated at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) will most likely serve in leading roles in international military operations, which will demand both intellect and character. There is, however, a lack of systematic research on which character traits that are crucial for succeeding in these operations, and hence, to develop during military training and education at the NMA. Purpose of study: This paper discusses the process of selecting the most important character strengths for development in cadets attending the NMA. Method: Two groups of participants, one expert group and one military group, were given a list of 24 character strengths to select from (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Findings and Results: The following 9 character strengths were most important to both groups: leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, citizenship, open-mindedness, social intelligence, self-regulation and creativity. In addition, perspective, fairness, and love of learning were chosen by the military group, totaling 12 character strengths in all. Conclusions and recommendations: These 12 character strengths were selected for further research to explore ways of measuring them live in military training exercises, to determine the extent to which they can be developed through military training, and to see which strengths better predict military officer performance.

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1. Introduction

Educating cadets to serve as military officers has been the task of the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) since 1750. Officers will certainly face challenging situations during their career after graduating from the NMA (Heen, 2006; Heen & Wathne, 2006). These situations may require leadership "in extremis" under the direst most immediate adverse and unforeseen conditions (Kolditz, 2010; Torgersen, Steiro, & Sæverot, 2013). Clausewitz' (1832/1976) called this "the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion." He referred to this as character, or character strength, and stated that "a strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions" (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). It is crucial to ensure that officers graduating from the NMA are sufficiently prepared with the expertise, social proficiency, and personal skills to lead in these types of situations (Boe, 2013; 2014).

Doty and Sowden (2009) have argued the importance of integrating the development of character in all ongoing training of soldiers in the U.S. Army. They found that freestanding classes in ethics are ineffective. They also encourage moral development of soldiers to enhance military results. This is nothing new. In the USMC magazine "The Gazette" from June 1919, the basic principles of morality are laid out: respect, confidence, contentment, harmony and pride. These traits were designated as the foundation of all morality (Jenkins, 1919). The development of character was seen as the foundation of high morale. Intelligence, combined with character and commitment, has proven successful in the selection of Special Forces units (Boe, 2011; Boe, Woolley, & Durkin, 2011). The NMA aims to develop both intellect and character in its cadets, and regards these as key characteristics of officer competency. However, systematic research has not yet determined what specific character traits are most important for Norwegian military army officers to succeed, and hence what character strengths the NMA should strive to develop in their cadets. The NMA, therefore, has decided to launch a research and development project with the purpose of examining character itself, what specific character strengths are most vital to succeed as a military officer, and if and how these character strengths can be developed in cadets at the NMA.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) describe in depth the development of a classification scheme of 24 character strengths categorized under six main virtues that they suggest are ubiquitously valued across cultures. These virtues represent "core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers... [and that] are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). Character strengths are defined as "the psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that define virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13).

The NMA counterpart in the United States, West Point, states that its mission is to educate "commissioned leaders of character" (Doty & Joiner, 2009). This is in line with Snider (2011), who suggests that it is important for the American army to take an institutional role and overall responsibility for soldier and officer character development. According to Snider (2011), U.S. Army doctrine does not describe how to develop character in soldiers and officers, but does acknowledge its importance. The counterparts in Norway are the Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine (NAFJOD) (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007), and the document outlining the view of the Norwegian Chief of Defence on leadership in the military (Forsvaret, 2012), both of which refer to the desirable properties of an officer, but do not indicate how these properties are to be developed. The NMA project "Character in military leaders" will address which specific character strengths are important for military command, and how these properties can be developed in cadets (Boe, 2013, 2014).

2. The importance of character to succeed as a military leader

The following citation from General H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. (Kruse, 2012) addresses the importance of character in military leaders: "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy."

An officer must have the capacity to lead under extreme conditions. What separates military leadership from leadership in most other organizations is the necessity to face and cope with extreme situations where your own life as well as the lives of those you command is in danger. Under these demanding conditions an officer will have to

make decisions that may result in both taking lives and risking lives. The view of the Norwegian Chief of Defence on leadership in the military states:

"It is about doing the uncomfortable and being able to cope with it; overcoming powerlessness; and avoiding emotional breakdown. Military leadership will demand a robustness in order to think clearly and effectively and cope with one's feelings when facing complex and difficult situations" (Forsvaret, 2012:11, *our translation*).

The U.S. Army doctrine on leadership contains a requirements model (U.S. Army, 2012a) which comprises several attributes and competencies. Three categories of leader competencies are described. The leader serves to lead others; to develop the environment, themselves, others, and the profession as a whole; and to achieve organizational goals. The leader attributes described in the model are character, presence and intellect. Character captures the values and identity of the leader; presence captures the leader's outward appearance, demeanor, actions, and words; and intellect captures the mental and social faculties necessary to lead. A good character, a solid presence and a keen intellect enable the leader to perform with greater effect.

The Greek historian and soldier Xenophon said the true test of a leader is whether others will follow him (or her) of their own free will in times of "immense hardship" (Wood, 1964). A military leader plays a key role affecting soldiers' morale and character development (Williams, 2010). Moran (1967) states that the practical implication of leadership is one's capacity to frame plans which will succeed, and the ability to persuade others to carry them out in the face of death. Many military leaders are well known to have possessed certain important attributes that made them successful. For instance, Alexander the Great personifies heroic leadership, but he was also a risk taker, physical, and passionate (Keegan, 1987). Although several anecdotal examples exist of what character means for military leadership (Hughes & Beatty, 2005; Snider, 2006; Wong, Gerras, Kidd, Pricone, & Swengros, 2003), to our knowledge scientifically based research on what are the most important character strengths for Norwegian military leaders to succeed has yet to be systematically investigated.

2.1. Previous attempts to define the specific traits, values and attitudes relevant for military personnel

Various branches of the Norwegian Armed Forces have developed lists of vital traits, values and attitudes for success. The Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine (NAFJOD) (Forsvarets Stabsskole, 2007) contains a chapter on the military profession, stating that the basic values that should govern all activity for the Norwegian Armed Forces are *respect, responsibility, and courage*. NAFJOD further states that the military profession demands extreme discipline and a well-developed moral and ethical sensibility. The Norwegian Naval Academy's philosophy of leadership development refers to "the seven little ones," that is, the seven virtues for operational leadership (Sjøkrigsskolen, 2009, chapter 6). These seven virtues are *wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, humanity, humor and robustness*. Wisdom, in Greek "phronesis," is the most important virtue according to this document. The Norwegian Army's handbook of officer conduct (Hærstaben, 2006) describes five traits and attitudes expected from an officer. An army officer should be *brave, resourceful, competent, caring and loyal*.

Character as a requisite for leadership has been touted in the military doctrine of several other countries, such as the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. It is looked upon as a critical collection of strengths, virtues, and values required for strong leadership (Walker, 2008). For instance, the U.S. Army (2012b) doctrine on Army leadership summarizes the values associated with character as the following: *Army values, empathy, warrior ethos/service ethos, and discipline*. Army values incorporate seven values the U.S. Army aims to develop in its soldiers and officers: *loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage*. Empathy is described as the ability to experience something from another person's point of view; the ability to identify with and enter into another person's feelings and emotions; and the desire to care for and take care of soldiers and others. The doctrine states that warrior ethos/service ethos constitute the internal shared attitudes and beliefs that embody the spirit of the Army for soldiers and army civilians alike. Finally, discipline is regarded as the control of one's own behavior according to Army values; the mindset to obey and enforce good orderly practices in administrative, organizational, training, and operational duties (U.S. Army, 2012b). The U.S. Marine Corps has also developed a list of traits that characterize a good military leader: *judgment, dependability, integrity, decisiveness, courage, and knowledge* (Lint, 2014). The U.S. Army Special Forces have established twelve personal attributes that are associated with the successful completion of Special Forces training. The first two attributes, intelligence and

physical fitness, are said to be “purely objective.” The remaining ten attributes are referred to as character traits, and the U.S. Army Special Forces will look for evidence of these character traits in each applicant. The ten character traits are *motivation, trustworthiness, accountability, maturity, stability, judgment, decisiveness, teamwork, influence, and communications* (Schumacher, 2005).

2.2. A classification of character strengths

Peterson and Seligman's book "Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and classification" from 2004 was an important step towards creating a classification of virtues and character strengths. Table 1 gives a short overview of the 6 virtues and the accompanying 24 character strengths as classified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The 6 virtues are wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under each virtue are listed the related specific character strengths.

Table 1. An overview of the classification of virtues and character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

1. WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE - cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge <i>Creativity</i> [originality, ingenuity] <i>Curiosity</i> [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience] <i>Open-mindedness</i> [judgment, critical thinking] <i>Love of learning</i> [mastering new skills] <i>Perspective</i> [wisdom]
2. COURAGE - emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal <i>Bravery</i> [valor] <i>Persistence</i> [perseverance, industriousness] <i>Integrity</i> [authenticity, honesty] <i>Vitality</i> [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]
3. HUMANITY - interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others <i>Love</i> [valuing close relations with others] <i>Kindness</i> [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, niceness] <i>Social intelligence</i> [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]
4. JUSTICE - civic strengths that underlie healthy community life <i>Citizenship</i> [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork] <i>Fairness</i> [treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice] <i>Leadership</i> [encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done]
5. TEMPERANCE - strengths that protect against excess <i>Forgiveness and mercy</i> <i>Humility/Modesty</i> <i>Prudence</i> [being careful about one's choices] <i>Self-regulation</i> [self-control, regulating what one feels and does]
6. TRANSCENDENCE - strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning <i>Appreciation of beauty and excellence</i> [awe, wonder, elevation] <i>Gratitude</i> <i>Hope</i> [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation] <i>Humor</i> [playfulness] <i>Spirituality</i> [religiousness, faith, purpose]

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), these virtues and character strengths can be found in all cultures and are regarded as universal. However, this does not necessarily mean all 24 character strengths will be relevant in a military context. So which of these 24 character strengths are considered especially important to develop in Norwegian military army officers?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of participants responsible for the project “Character in military leaders” (henceforth referred to as the expert group). The expert group comprised 8 employees of the NMA who either had previous experience with research on character strengths, or had been working extensively with selecting and/or developing military leaders. Two were purely academic employees, two were academics with a military background, and four were military officers who also had an academic background. The second group consisted of 27 military officers currently employed in various positions at the NMA. All the military officers had a background from the infantry and were experienced officers with several years of previous service in the Norwegian Army.

3.1. Material

The participants were asked to select character strengths from Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) list of 24 character strengths. Participants in the expert group were all given a paper version containing the 24 character strengths translated into Norwegian (Bang, 2014). Included in this translation was a short definition of each of the character strengths. The military group was given an on-line questionnaire with the same list of 24 character strengths.

3.2. Procedure

The expert group had an open round-table discussion about each of the 24 character strengths, with the purpose of identifying the most important and relevant character strengths for succeeding as a military leader. The group agreed on a list of 9 character strengths. The 9 character strengths selected were not ranked in relation to each other.

The on-line questionnaire was sent to the group of military officers who were requested to return the completed questionnaire within a week. Their task was to rate the importance of each character strength for military leaders on a scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The higher the score of each character strength, the more important this character strength was considered to be by the military officers. The on-line questionnaire was sent to all military officers employed at the NMA. The actual number of officers employed at the NMA is classified information and is therefore withheld in this paper. 27 military officers answered the questionnaire.

Table 2 gives an overview of the 9 character strengths chosen by the expert group to be the most important for a military officer. The character strengths are categorized under the core virtues defined in Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) taxonomy of character strengths and core virtues.

Table 2. The 9 character strengths chosen by the project group (n=8).

COURAGE	WISDOM	JUSTICE	TEMPERANCE	HUMANITY
Bravery	Open-mindedness	Citizenship	Self-regulation	Social intelligence
PersistenceCreativity	Leadership			
Integrity				

As is evident in table 2, the expert group selected three character strengths belonging to Courage, while the core virtues Wisdom and Justice received two character strengths each. Temperance and Humanity had one character strength each.

The members of the military group were asked to rate each of the 24 character strengths on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important) as to whether the character strength was important or not for a military officer. In order to differentiate between important and less important character strengths, a cut-off point of 4.00 was used in the analyses for this group. 12 character strengths were given a score of 4.00 or higher by the military employees (see table 3).

Table 3. Mean values and standard deviations (SD) given to the 24 character strengths by the military employees (n=27).

Core virtue	Character strengths	Mean*	SD
JUSTICE	1. Leadership	4.89	0.43
COURAGE	2. Integrity	4.85	0.46
COURAGE	3. Persistence	4.78	0.51
COURAGE	4. Bravery	4.63	0.74
JUSTICE	5. Citizenship	4.59	0.57
JUSTICE	6. Fairness	4.59	0.50
WISDOM	7. Open-mindedness	4.56	0.64
HUMANITY	8. Social intelligence	4.52	0.58
WISDOM	9. Love of learning	4.33	0.62
WISDOM	10. Perspective	4.26	0.59
TEMPERANCE	11. Self-regulation	4.19	0.88
WISDOM	12. Creativity	4.00	0.55
TRANSCENDENCE	13. Hope	3.96	0.98
TEMPERANCE	14. Forgiveness and mercy	3.93	0.96
HUMANITY	15. Kindness	3.93	0.55
WISDOM	16. Curiosity	3.89	0.80
COURAGE	17. Vitality	3.85	0.46
TEMPERANCE	18. Humility/Modesty	3.63	0.69
TEMPERANCE	19. Prudence	3.56	0.89
TRANSCENDENCE	20. Humor	3.44	0.70
HUMANITY	21. Love	3.33	0.78
TRANSCENDENCE	22. Gratitude	3.33	0.92
TRANSCENDENCE	23. Appreciation of beauty and excellence	2.81	1.00
TRANSCENDENCE	24. Spirituality	1.85	0.99

* Scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

Character strengths selected by both the expert and the military group are marked as **bold text**.

Table 3 shows that the military group chose 9 of the same character strengths as the expert group did (marked in bold letters), giving these character strengths a mean value of 4.00 or higher. The character strengths selected by both groups were leadership, integrity, persistence, bravery, citizenship, open-mindedness, social intelligence, self-regulation, and creativity (marked as bold text in table 3). In addition, the military group chose three other character strengths as important: fairness (M=4.59), belonging to the core virtue Justice, in addition to love of learning (M=4.33) and perspective (M=4.26), both belonging to the core virtue Wisdom. Two character strengths - appreciation of beauty and excellence (M=2.81) and spirituality (M=1.85) - were clearly regarded as not important by the military employees. It is interesting to note that the 12 selected character strengths cover five out of six core virtues in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy. No character strengths belonging to the core virtue of Transcendence were selected as important for succeeding as a military officer.

4. Discussion

In total, 12 character strengths were found to be important if we combine the results from the two groups, consisting of the 9 character strengths found in both groups, and the three additional character strengths chosen by the military employees. In table 4, the 12 character strengths are categorized according to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy of core virtues.

Table 4. The 12 character strengths categorized according to Peterson and Seligman's core virtues.

WISDOM	JUSTICE	COURAGE	TEMPERANCE	HUMANITY
Open-mindedness	Leadership	Integrity	Self-regulation	Social intelligence
Love of learning	Citizenship	Persistence		
Perspective	Fairness	Bravery		
Creativity				

In section 2.1 of this paper we presented a selection of traits, values and attitudes considered by different sources to be important for military leadership in Norway and in the United States. To what degree do our 12 character strengths resonate with this selection? To help us make such a comparison, we categorized the different traits, values and attitudes presented in section 2.1, into Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy of core virtues (see table 5).

Table 5. Traits, values and attitudes categorized according to Peterson and Seligman's 6 core virtues.

JUSTICE	COURAGE	WISDOM	TEMPERANCE	HUMANITY	TRANSCENDENCE
Loyal/Loyalty	Courage	Wisdom	Temperance	Humanity	Humor
Duty	Personal courage	Competent	Discipline	Caring	
Respect	Brave/Bravery	Knowledge	Stability	Empathy	
Selfless service	Integrity	Maturity			
Responsibility	Robustness	Judgment			
Dependability	Decisiveness				
Trustworthiness					
Accountability					
Teamwork					
Justice					

When comparing table 4 and 5, we make the following reflections. First, when looking at the frequency of characteristics or character strengths categorized under each of the core virtues in the two tables, there seems to be agreement that the three most important core virtues in military leadership are Justice, Courage and Wisdom. Whether one speaks about personality traits, values, attitudes or character strengths, the most frequently mentioned for military officers reflect these three core virtues.

Second, our selection of character strengths (table 4) reflects a broader set of strengths of wisdom and knowledge, compared to previous lists of important characteristics of military officers (table 5). Our participants found four wisdom-related character strengths to be particularly important for military officers: open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective and creativity. Looking at the list of traits, values and attitudes categorized under Wisdom in table 5, perspective (wisdom, competent, knowledge, maturity) and open-mindedness (judgment) are emphasized as important, but not (at least not explicitly) creativity and love of learning. This finding may indicate that creativity and love of learning are not as vital as other character strengths for military officers, or that these two character strengths are implicit in the list of military characteristics (e.g. to develop into a competent, knowledgeable and mature officer, you have to be creative and love to learn). Another interpretation is that creativity and love of learning have been overlooked as relevant character strengths for succeeding as a military officer.

Third, among the character strengths associated with Humanity, social intelligence was the only one selected in our study. This is in accordance with the emphasis on Empathy in the U.S. Army doctrine (U.S. Army, 2012b). However, both the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy and the Norwegian Army officer's code of conduct highlight the importance of humanity (Sjøkrigsskolen, 2009, chapter 6) and caring (Hærstaben, 2006) when describing what is expected from an officer. The corresponding character strengths of kindness and love were not selected as particularly important by our participants. The Royal Norwegian Naval Academy also mentions humor – a character strength belonging to the core virtue Transcendence – as one of the seven most important virtues for naval officers (Sjøkrigsskolen, 2009, chapter 6). This character strength receives a low score among our participants ($M=3.44$), and it does not appear as an important characteristic in any of the lists we have collected as part of our research project on important character strengths among military officers.

As mentioned earlier, Clausewitz (1832/1976) stated that the essence of military leadership is developing "the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion." Self-regulation, persistence, bravery and integrity can all be thought of as character strengths which help officers to keep their head under extremely stressful conditions and situations.

Sosik, Gentry, and Chun (2012) investigated the importance of the character strengths of integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence for success in top-level executives. They found that these strengths were positively and significantly associated with measures of executive performance. However, the character strength integrity contributed the most to explaining variance in executive performance. Integrity was selected as the second

most important character strength in our military group. All these four character strengths were among the 12 selected in our study. This lends credibility to the assumption that there may be a number of common character strengths that are perceived to be important in work situations, regardless of context.

To conclude, the 12 character strengths identified in this study seem to represent a valid starting point for further research. They all resonate (albeit to a varying degree) with personality traits, values, attitudes and character traits previously identified as important for personnel in the Armed Forces – both in Norway and in the United States.

4.1. Limitations and future research

We will mention three limitations of this study. First, we have asked experts and military officers what they *believe* are the most important character strengths to succeed as a military officer. Whether the 12 selected character strengths actually predict success as a military officer, and what specific success criteria they are associated with, we still do not know. Hence, there is a need to study the association between the 12 character strengths and different indicators of leader effectiveness in military officers (e.g. performance evaluation, military career). Also, it could be interesting to study the association between NMA cadets' scores on the 12 character strengths, and different cadet performance indicators, like grades at NMA and performance evaluations from supervisors. Second, only the expert group had comprehensive knowledge about character strengths. The military group selected character strengths on the basis of a short definition and description of each of the 24 character strengths from VIA-IS (Bang, 2014). We don't know the depth of the military officers' understanding of the character strengths they evaluated, and there is certainly a danger that a superficial level of knowledge could hamper and bias the selection process. Third, the cut-off point (minimum 4.0 on a 5-point scale) we used for the military group to select the most important character strengths is rather arbitrary. If the cut-off point had been set only 0.15 points below 4.0, five additional character strengths would have been selected (hope, forgiveness and mercy, kindness, curiosity and vitality). Hence, there may be more candidates among the character strengths which might serve as important predictors for success as a military leader. We need empirical studies on all 24 character strengths to find the relationship between them and effective military leadership.

5. Conclusion

Officers educated at the Norwegian Military Academy must be prepared to serve in leading roles in future international military operations, which will demand both intellect and character. The Norwegian Military Academy's new research and leadership development program aims to investigate the nature of character in this setting, which character strengths are most important for a military officer, and how to develop such character strength in cadets. The two groups described in this paper each chose the same 9 of 24 character strengths. This finding supported a common perception of the significance of these 9 character strengths for officer development. It was further decided that a total of 12 character strengths selected by combining the results from the two groups would serve as a valid basis for further development work in the research project.

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